PULTIBUS SCOTTORUM PRAEGRAVATUS
A Brief Survey of Celtic Civilization
Kit Kat Club Columbus, Ohio
January 16, 1979
John M. Buchanan

Mr. Chadeayne, members of Kit Kat and guests; at least weekly, for the past two decades I have been in the business of speaking to groups of people. One cannot do that much speaking without coming to some conclusion about the expectations of those who have listened patiently to all those words, and the responsibilities of the one who prepares and speaks them. I have found helpful, for the sake of both humility and perspective, several lines out of Anthony Trollope's Barchester Towers:

> "There is, perhaps, no greater hardship on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silently, and be tormented."

Trollope, of course, was only partially correct. In these realms, members of Kit Kat Club, with regularity compel one another to sit silently and be tormented. In any event, it is something of a wonder to me that you should want to go through with this. I was not comforted, frankly, by a conversation I had with a clergyman member of Kit Kat who no longer lives in the community, shortly after I was received into membership. I told him of my anxiety over the fact that sometime in the future I would have to stand up and say something. He, in turn, revealed his own anxiety years ago - and that marvelous moment in the Card Room, on the night of his freshman paper, when he overheard a fellow member, recently arrived, lament the fact that the evening would be spent listening to some damn preacher.

I shall try not to preach, although my children have observed on occasion, that whenever I warm to any topic, even the suggestion that they might wash their hands before coming to the dinner table, it always comes out sounding like a sermon: introduction, three points and conclusion.

My intent is to introduce to you some fascinating characters I have come to know in the past six months. Their impact on Western Civilization, I have concluded, was immense; although I confess that this conclusion is new for me. I knew very little about them before I prepared this paper. They are the Celts - or Kelts -; the Druids, Bards, Brehons, Chieftains, Warriors, Scholars, Poets, Monks and Abbots of Celtic Civilization.

My interest and imagination were stimulated, initially, five years ago, when, with wife and five children I spent the summer as the pastor of the Parish Kirk in a Highland Village, near the Northwest coast of Scotland. Kinlochleven was the name of the place, a village of 1200 between Glen Coe and Fort William. It was a good experience, I fell in love with things Scottish and came home aware that my understanding of British history was woefully inadequate. I hadn't the foggiest notion of where the clans came from, or who inhabited the land originally. To make matters worse I discovered that there is a gap in the literature available to the semi-serious student of history. One must settle for comic-book caliber tourist material, or very serious history which tells, frankly, more than I wanted to know. In any event, my interest removed to the periphery of my life until this summer, when again with wife and five children, I went back. This time to Moffat, Dumfriesshire, Border county, Robert Burns country, sheep country. Broad (Braed) Scots. Once

again we fell in love. I was the minister of St. Andrews Parish Kirk, Church of Scotland: we lived in a 19th century manse with thirteen foot ceilings and a coal fireplace in each room. I stood in their pulpit, visited in their homes, conducted several funerals and baptized a wee girl. We enjoyed the very special privilege of helping with sheep "clippin", walked in the hills, enjoyed lamb chops and salmon, whiskey by the glass - unpolluted by water and ice, room temperature lager, sherry in the late afternoon and the richest cream in the world. Four desserts was standard fare, spooned into a bowl: a trifle, tart, a mousse, always strawberries and the inevitable pitcher of cream. At the board of a distinguished barrister, former sheriff, I was told - by him - to pour it on: that there is no food that doesn't taste better with a wee bit of cream.

More important, we were touched deeply by something we experienced in the life of a small Scottish town: a sense of deep pride in nation and history: a sense of caring for one another; a graciousness and a respect for traditions, institutions and people that was altogether new for us - and altogether refreshing. We had forgotten how good that felt. But that is another story - perhaps even another paper.

Two incidents brought my interest in the Celts to the surface. We took a day off and drove to Carlisle, England to see Hadrian's Wall, and spent several hours at Vindolanda - an excavated Roman settlement. Impressive - stirring: a multitude of artifacts to examine and an entire compound unearthed - through which one can walk musing about the simple but devastating reality that people walked in and out of these buildings nearly two thousand years ago. But I confess, in the middle of the experience my mind began to wander - to the people north of the wall. Who were they? What were they like? What was there about them that inspired the Romans to such prodigious efforts simply to keep them out? I came home that night, impressed with Rome, but even more impressed with the people who attacked the wall, broke through it, and eventually swallowed it into their own history as the legions retired to the bosom of their crumbling empire. The Celts!

A second incident was equally stimulating. With the three oldest of our children we drove to Stranraer, boarded a ferry, sailed to Larne, Northern Ireland, rented a car, drove the breadth of Ulster into Donegal, Republic of Ireland, up through wild, beautiful lonely, coastal country: Letterkenny, Creeslough, to the Kearney farm, where my wife's grandparents began married life and where her cousins still live: forty acres of potatoes: five adults, none married, peat - or turf the only fuel, running cold water from a single spigot, four cows and some chickens living in a barn underneath the bedrooms. We spent two days there and it was like walking into another world, a Leon Uris novel, or at least another time altogether. Who are these people? Where did they come from? Why are they still here doing what they have done for a thousand years? The Celts. The same people we had come to know in Scotland,but here, in Ireland, in purer, even more authentic and unspoiled form. We spent the whole evening trying to make conversation, and were reduced finally to conducting an interview, prying out of them information they would never reveal without urging.

In the months since I have tried to find answers to the questions our experience posed. It has been a fascinating and rewarding journey.

Who were the Celts? Linguists say it may be either Celt or Kelt. The Greeks called them Keltoi, Germans - Kelten, the French softened it to Celtes (le celt) and one linguist observes that "Irish leave their Keltic homeland and

root like Krazy for the Boston Celtics." (National Geographic, May 1977). A broad definition of the Celts is "a group of related tribes linked by language, religion and culture, that gave rise to the first civilization north of the Alps." (Ibid. p.585).At the height of their dominance, around the third century B.C., Celtic culture prevailed from Spain to the Black Sea, and from the North Sea to the Mediterranean.

They left behind their names for the rivers beside which they lived - Celtic names: Danube, Rhine, Seine, Thames, Shannon. Modern cities stand on the sites of Celtic settlements and bear their names: London, Geneva, Strasbourg, Bonn, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Ankara.

Twenty thousand Celts - whom the Romans were calling Gauls, crossed the Hellespont - an area thereafter known as Galatia. In 440 B.C. Herodotus reports the presence of Celts in the Upper Danube. Plato reports that they are a nation addicted to drunkenness. Aristotle records their reckless indifference to danger. Gauls sacked Rome in 387 B.C. and then settled down outside the city and stirred up trouble for several centuries.

Celtic troops were hired as mercenaries in the Peloponnesian Wars and Alexander the Great was interviewed by a delegation of Celtic chieftains from the Adriatic Coast in 335 B.C. Alexander wanted to know the source of their legendary ferocity. He asked them what they feared: the reply: "No man - only that the sky might fall on their heads."

What were they like? National Geographic did a lengthy study in 1977 and wrote:

> "They introduced to North Europe the use of iron. Iron for tools and weapons. And in seven centuries of cultured dominance they created Europe's first major industrial revolution, its first common market, its first international court of arbitration. Celts introduced soap to the Greeks and Romans, invented chain armour, were first to shoe horses...They set our standard four foot eight and one-half railroad guage with the span of their chariots; pioneered the iron plowshare, the rotary flour mill, a wheeled harvester two millenia before Cyrus McCormick."

The Celtic warrior was universally respected and feared in the ancient world. Theologically they believed there was no difference between life and death, not a bad idea to have your army endorse. Their appearance reflected their ferocity. A Celtic warrior bleached and starched his hair, often fought stark naked except for bracelets and collar. They looked big and were big. Archeologists have discovered a 6'5" skeleton of a warrior and it is a matter of record that Celtic warriors were fined for getting fat.

Having seen them in action the Greek geographer Strabo wrote: "The whole race is madly fond of war. They cut off the heads of their enemies and attach them to the saddles of their horses." It was not uncommon for two warriors to fight to the death over the choice haunch of roast pig at a victory feast.

And their women? I hope profoundly that Bella Abzug or my wife and daughters, for that matter, never discover what I am about to read to you. Roman historian, Ammianus Marcelinus - "A Gallic woman, fighting beside her man, is a

match for a whole troop of foreigners. Steely eyed...she swells her neck, gnashes her teeth, flexes her huge white biceps, and rains wallops and kicks as though from the twisted cords of a catapult." (Op. cit. National Geographic).

The fascinating counterpart to the Celtic warrior, and the other side to the Celtic character, however, is revealed in the mystical figure of the Druid. Druids prevent us from describing Celts as barbarians. Druids were a priestly caste throughout Celtic civilization. One authority describes them as forecasters of the future who fixed the time for great enterprises, the educators of young nobility, the conservers of tradition and a kind of world court which did, in fact, meet yearly to settle disputes between tribes.

Professor John T. McNeill, University of Chicago, describes the Druidic order, to which men were admitted after twelve years of arduous study - in traditional lore, wisdom, poetry and music. They did not write, unfortunately - perhaps one of the greatest of tragedies. There is not a single authentic sentence of Druidic derivation in existence. They were religious functionaries, political advisors, teachers, keepers of tradition. They were, I conclude, that which gave Celtic civilization its flavor and immense vitality.

In Britain and Ireland the Druids were never suppressed by the Romans - a fact which is immensely important in the centuries to come. The power of the Druids ended with the coming of Christianity - but there is no doubt that one of the most potent forces in Irish and Scottish history - the monastery - was, in fact, the Druidic tradition living on. In Ireland, in addition to Druids, there were orders of Bards and Brehons, legal scholars, which existed well into the Christian era.

The vital and creative energy of the Celtic people is apparent in their art. Curiously, art was not a peripheral activity for these ferocious people. Rather it seems to have been central to life, "imparting both surface decoration and supernatural power to scabbard, brooch and bracelet." (National Geographic, p.603). Celtic art is described by one scholar as "exuberant, sinuous and abstract, reminiscent of Mattise and Piccasso". (Miklus Szabo, National Geographic). The Irish monk in the Middle Ages, decorating the perimeters of his manuscript with elaborate and colorful symbols - was reflecting his Celtic past.

They never managed to create a cohesive empire. Julius Caesar sneered at their inability, frankly, to get their act together, and ultimately they disappeared from the pages of history. The story of the end of Celtic dominance is the most poignant I discovered in my research. Julius Caesar, ambitious young Proconsul of Gaul, became alarmed when a Gallic tribe in what is now Switzerland began to migrate west. After pursuing and massacring that tribe he proceeded to pacify all of Gaul. In the process he leveled eight hundred towns and killed, by his own count, one million, one hundred ninety-two thousand men, women and children. The climax came at Alesia, France, 52 B.C., in one of history's greatest battles: Caesar surrounded eighty thousand Gauls under Vercingetorix and built an oval fortification nine and one-half miles around to keep them in. When some Gauls slipped away another ring was constructed fourteen miles around to keep the reinforcements out. A quarter of a million Celts took the bait, attacked the circular Roman trap and were utterly defeated. Vercingetorix emerged alone from the gates of Alesia, "tall, proud, resplendent in silver and enameled armour on horseback. Riding down the hill he made a ritual sunwise circle around the dias where Caesar waited. Dismounting, he flung down his weapons and sat in silent submission at the feet of his conquerer... Caesar sent him to Rome chained like a wild animal; six years later dragged him from

his cell and had him strangled." (National Geographic). Celtic culture and civilization faded quickly thereafter in Northern Europe.

But not so in Scotland and Ireland, and therein is a vital difference. Hadrian's Wall, built in 130 A.D. and another wall, of dirt, named for Antonious Pius - constructed in the 140's A.D., stretched across the midsection of Britain. The Northern wall proved indefensible and for a time the Romans held their position along the stone fortifications which we visited. There were several incursions by the Celts - or Picts, as the Romans knew them. But ultimately the legions withdrew, the cultures met and intermingled and Roman influence was simply swallowed up.

What ended Celtic or Gaelic dominance in Ireland centuries later, was a combination of Cromwell's scorched earth policy, the resettling of rural Gaels in cities, the Ulster plantation and the potato farming. In Scotland Gaelic culture was dealt a fatal blow when the Highlanders lost at Culloden in 1745, and Clan, Kilt and Pipe were outlawed and the glens cleared of people to make space for sheep.

> "You take the High road and I'll take the low road and I'll be in Scotland afore ye" - is a Celtic lament: two Highlanders, in an English prison after Charles Edward Stuart's disaster: the "low road" means death; it's the only way back to Scotland - "But me and my true love will never, never meet, on the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond."

One historian said "The biggest moment in Irish history is that the Romans never got here. We remained Celtic. We kept our peculiar patterns of society and customs, our Celtic approach to life." (National Geographic).

Elsewhere Rome suppressed the focal point of Celtic culture - the Druids. But not in Britain. I never found out why but it was a very happy oversight. When Christianity came to Ireland as the bearer of Latin culture, it too, stopped short of eliminating Druidic influence. And the resultant Irish church was never altogether comfortable with Rome. Again, Professor McNeill: "Changes that were made in the continent and the tightening solidarity with Rome were not reflected in Britain. Instead, insular Celtic customs became endeared by inveterate use. Toward Rome there was no antagonism, but respect without obedience," (The Celtic Churches, p.29ff).

Thus in Ireland, and later in Scotland, there is a long history of simple stubborn refusal to be Roman. The conflicts are countless: matters of hair style for monks, who can ordain whom, the proper way to chant the Psalms. Eventually time would erode it, but for a thousand years Irish and Scottish Christianity remained cool toward the emergence of Rome.

In the meantime Celtic culture in Ireland, now Christian in name, gave birth to a truly astonishing, and, I think, significant phenomenon - Irish Monasticism. Thousands upon thousands of Irish young men and women entered monasteries. The same thing was happening to a lesser degree in Scotland, England, Wales. Important British churchmen were not Bishops or ecclesiastical politicians - but abbots.

Beyond the obvious significance for later church history, what I found terribly interesting about the phenomenon was its obvious Celtic character and its reflection of those earlier heroes - the Druids. As indicated earlier, Druidic culture was never stamped out in Ireland. Its religious content yielded to Christianity, but Bards and Brehons continued to function. Many of the great Irish

monastic leaders actually studied under Druids, for instance. And Columba, who led the missionary movement to Scotland, defended the Guild of Bards in what appears to have been a political convention in Derry.

In the old Druidic schools a twelve year course of study earned the degree of Ollam. So, in British monasteries the arts continued to flourish. Monks not only studied scripture, prayed and sang Psalms, they also wrote poetry, cultivated their unique style of calligraphy and composed music.

Monks worked very hard, farming, fishing and herding and were, in most instances, self-sufficient communities. Listen to Professor McNeill on the subject:

> "Many came in childhood and grew up in the stimulating atmosphere of an institution where men in earnest were always at work with hand and brain or engaged in acts of prayer or holy song. The growing lads may have suffered from the meagerness of the diet, the lack of play and the pressures of school tasks, but we see no evidence of recalcitrance...In some monasteries only one meal a day was eaten and sleep was broken by nightly office. That the vivacious Celts in large numbers subjected themselves to these inconveniences remains something of a wonder. It is a lesson in the possibilities of human nature under the impulse of devotion." (op.cit. p.82).

A typical Celtic monastery contained small huts in a circle and several functional buildings including barn, chapel and "scriptorium". Here the manuscripts were copied and made into codices - and here - the idea of writing as an art form and not merely a method of preserving words flourished. No effort was spared in making a revered text a thing of beauty to the eye: pages were decorated with brilliant colors, elaborate calligraphy, symbols and pictures of mythic animals. Pagan Celtic art was preserved - intact - by the monastery. Much of the work was destroyed or stolen by the Norse invaders after 800 A.D., but some, fortunately, remain. The Book of Kells is perhaps the best known to students of art. Produced around 800 it is an exquisitely decorated 9"x12" book, which one art scholar calls the chief treasure of the Western World. It is on display at Trinity College, Dublin.

In addition to decorative calligraphy the monks refined the art of stone carving. A favorite monastery activity was to prepare one's own grave stone. More than thirty authentic Celtic Crosses still stand in Ireland. One of the oldest in Scotland is in a Church at Ruthwell - twenty feet high, with elaborate carving in each of the panels - dated around the end of the seventh century.

Elsewhere in Great Britain,the Monastic movement was flourishing, although not quite as dramatically as in Ireland. David, Patron Saint of Wales, was known as a strict disciplinarian: nicknamed "Aquaticus", he strictly required total abstinence from alcohol. But asceticism was moderate in British monasteries. In Ireland celibacy was not required: in fact of the three monastic orders - the least holy was the most ascetic, and the only one which required celibacy. The Celtic character was capable of great sacrifice - but not, it seems, for the sake of sacrifice.

A collection of sayings - of a beloved Welsh Abbot in the sixth century - shows the mind and sensitivity of the movement. Cadoc was his name and I discovered these perfectly beautiful lines:

"No man is the son of knowledge if he is not also
the son of poetry.
No man loves poetry without loving the light,
Nor the light without loving the truth,
Nor the truth without loving justice,
Nor justice without loving God.
No man is pious who is not cheerful.
Love is heaven, hate is hell.
Conscience is the eye of God in the soul of man." (op.cit.p.30).

Light - truth - justice - God,I read in that, the beginnings of political radicalism which would take nine hundred years to blossom fully. Because they were detached from the comfortable church/state tete-a-tete which maintained throughout Christendom - British monks could take pot shots at the politicians. Gildas, from Bannockburn, Scotland, sixth century, began a long and noble Scottish tradition with this broadside...

"Kings hath Britain, but they are tyrants;
judges she hath, but they are impious;
priests hath Britain but they are unperceiving;
pastors so-called, but they are wolves about
to slay souls." (McNeill, op.cit. p.42).

The immense Celtic energies which had found a home in the monasteries, would hold out for centuries against the political supremacy of the Church of Rome. But more importantly, those energies would motivate monks by the thousands to leave the monastery and sail across the Irish sea - and then the Channel as missionaries. The effect was like a gentle leaven in the midst of the chaos, brutality and harshness known as the Dark Ages. My conclusion is that their impact was profound, if mostly unheralded, in what was later to become modern Western Civilization.

One story remains. Three thousand years before Christ, primitive flint users came to Kintyre, Scotland from North Ireland. The Romans called them Picts. In the fifth century A.D. Northern Irishmen settled again in what is now Argyll and called it the Kingdom of Dalriada. They were not really raiders, although a corruption of the Irish word for raider is how they would be known - henceforth - Scots. One of them, Columba, born in North East Donegal - 521, would become a legendary hero in Scottish history.

As a young man in Ireland, Columba studied bardic lore, became an accomplished Latin scholar and in his mid-thirties, like so many of his contemporaries, entered a monastery. From the beginning his career was punctuated with creativity and ambition. A dispute with his mentor, Finnian, was the impetus which propelled Columba into the stage of history. In his spare time Columba had made a copy of Finnian's private volume of Jerome's Gospels and Psalms. Finnian was furious: and appealed to the King of Tara in Meath for justice. The King decided in Finnian's favor and commanded Columba to turn over the manuscript. Columba refused and what began as a petty argument over the ownership of a book quickly erupted in a war. This time Columba was banished from Ireland under orders to convert as many men as were killed in the dispute over the copied manuscript.

And so this highly trained, strong and pious monk set sail from Derry with twelve followers to find an island for a new monastery. On May 12, 563, the little party landed on Iona, a two thousand acre, nearly uninhabited island off the Mull

in the Inner Hebrides. Iona was to become a most important spot in the history and hearts of Scotsmen thereafter.

From Iona teams of missionaries traveled to Dalriada - or Argyll - to convert the Picts, and on across Scotland to the continent. Columba's reputation and influence increased: he became the friend of royalty: the first consecration of a Scottish King happened on Iona in 574 and this island bears the remains of many of Scotland's later kings. The Abbey, now reconstructed, still stands and still welcomes the traveler, or penitent, or person of any faith who simply wishes time to be alone.

As is the case with other larger than life heroes, some of the Columba stories stretch the imagination. He was said to have healing power and control over the weather. One of the stories, however, has contemporary appeal. On a journey to visit King Brude of the Picts in 564, Columba and a party of monks made their way up the Great Glen headed for Inverness. On their way they witnessed on the River Ness the recovery of the corpse of a man mangled by a water beast. Columba, the story goes, nevertheless, sent a monk swimming across the river to recover a boat, while he held the raging beast at bay with the sign of the cross. Adherents of the Loch Ness monster are convinced that this story, at least, is true.

Scottish Christianity, and Scottish nationalism for a thousand years, would be influenced by Columba and his Iona community. The Scots, it seemed, would argue with Rome about anything. The date of Easter, for instance, the appropriate style of monastic tonsure, the mechanics of baptism and ordination. The real issue, as it ever was and ever would be, however, was that of stubborn Celtic autonomy. In 628 Pope Honorius wrote to "the nation of the Scots reminding them that they were few in number and at the ends of the earth and ought not to claim a wisdom above that of all the churches of the world." (McNeill, p.109). He should have saved his breath.

Thus the story ends. I have found it to be immensely interesting. It has been provocative, in suggesting ways to understand the Scottish Reformation with its virulent anti-Romanism, and the deep and profound Scottish antipathy toward things English. The fact that John Knox could be at once so gently pious and violently intolerant is not excused but perhaps explained by a little Celtic History. The fact that Highland Scot Presbyterians still think the Protestant Reformation is under attack, is not excused, but perhaps explained a bit by the centuries of Celtic History.

And Northern Ireland? No one seems to understand it, nor to have any solutions to the Troubles. But I conclude that Celtic History provides, at least, a "feel" for what is happening in that unhappy country. A footnote on the subject: while we were in Scotland an incident occurred in London which was probably not covered in the American Press. Several Northern Irish radicals sneaked into the House of Commons and at the most appropriate moment threw sacks of horse manure from the gallery onto the debating ministers. A typically Celtic gesture, I thought, which at least required no interpretation as to its meaning.

The Celtic character lives on in customs, which are experiencing a **renaissance** in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and Scotland; in Celtic superstitions which never really died, and in attitudes.

Listen to an Irish Celt speak autobiographically:

> "We're still considered drunk with words. We love to exaggerate, to boast, to show off, much as did the ancient Celts. No English understatement for us. Our turn of phrase, sense of humor, attitude to law and order are quite different. We won't wait at a red light if no car is coming. We'll cross - something an Englishman rarely does; a German never." (National Geographic).

It may be stretching too hard for socially redeeming conclusions and it may simply be the preacher in me, but perhaps Celtic History holds a bit of a clue about coping with the future. There are some, but not very many, scholars who are optimistic about the future. I was reading one of the more pessimistic in the quiet of St. Andrew's manse this summer, who both depressed and fascinated me. Robert Heilbroner in "An Inquiry Into the Human Prospect", suggests that our survival as a race depends on an end to the Enlightenment thinking, which has been dominant for several centuries. Heilbroner's positions are debatable - but interesting. The ideas which have made Western Civilization great are the very ideas which have brought us to the edge of extinction - individual freedom, industrialization and technology, urbanization. The only society capable of survival in the future, according to this gloomy prognosticator, will be static, frugal, authoritative, and broken into small units. Heilbroner wrote, "Mythic man, despised by the Enlightenment, is our only hope." (See Reaping the Whirlwind, Langdon Gilkey, p.79ff).

I hope, profoundly, that Heilbroner is wrong. But if he is not, I have made a start, in learning a bit about those prototype mythic men - the Celts.

And now the title, Pultibus Scottorum Praegravatus: it is from St. Jerome, one of the early church fathers, in the introduction to a commentary he wrote on the Book of Jeremiah. He was arguing with and refuting the theology of that great British heretic, Pelagius. He dismissed him with - "pultibus scottorum praegravatus", which translates "stuffed with the porridge of the Scots".

When I stumbled on to that quote I knew I had a title for my Kit Kat Paper. Having done the work and had my say, it occurs to me that objective men might find Jerome's words terribly appropriate: that having heard far more than you ever wanted to know about the Celts, you may feel "stuffed with Scottish porridge".

In any event, thank you for the privilege of delivering this paper.

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